

The Pit and the Pendulum Questions

Answer the following questions in complete sentences! Use a separate sheet!

1. We aren't told what the narrator sees in that horrified glance into the pit. If you were to draw the pit, what would you put in it?
2. Did General Lasalle's arrival seem an exceptionally lucky coincidence to you? Did it lessen the story's credibility or your enjoyment of it? If there had been no rescue, could we have had a story at all? Why or why not?
3. The scary aspect of the story comes from the details of setting. List as many of these details as you can. Do they emerge from a real, daytime world or from a nightmare one? What part of this story might in fact be a nightmare?
4. Poe's stories of terror can be read as mere horror stories, but many of them can also be interpreted symbolically. On one level, this is the story of a man tortured at the hands of the Inquisition. On another level, some critics read it as the story of a man who dies, almost loses his soul to Hell, and is rescued at the end by God. Let's see if the story "works" if it is read symbolically with this interpretation:
 - a. The man, above all, fears falling into the pit. What could the pit symbolize?
 - b. What does a pendulum suggest to you, and what does an old man with a scythe represent? What connection might there be between these symbols and the scythe on the pendulum in this story?
 - c. What could the paintings on the walls of the cell suggest?
 - d. Rats are conventionally used as symbols of death, decay, and the lower world. How does the prisoner's response to these rats—especially when they crawl all over him—suggest that he might see them in this way?
 - e. What sounds are usually associated with Judgment Day at the end of the world? Do you hear these sounds at the story's end?

Do you think this symbolic reading makes sense, or is it stretching the meaning of a "simple" horror story too much? Explain

5. Read aloud the passage in the story that describes the descent of the pendulum, beginning on page 264 with the words “Down—steadily down it crept.” How does Poe use repetition here to create suspense and even to suggest the steady downward movement of the knife?
6. Poe’s theory of storytelling held that a story should create a single, unique emotional effect. Given Poe’s language, what would you say is the single effect he aimed at in this story? Do you think he succeeded?
7. Poe also believed that the very first sentence of a story should contribute to this effect. If it did not, he believed the story was a failure. Do you think this story is a success or a failure? Why?